

VZCZCXRO6679
PP RUEHROV
DE RUEHMO #0069 0141445
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 141445Z JAN 09
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1482
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUEHXD/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 000069

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/14/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IS](#) [RS](#)

SUBJECT: RUSSIA UNSURE OF HAMAS' UNITY, WILL NOT MEDIATE
FOR ISRAEL

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

1. (C) MFA Counselor for Israel and Palestine Viktor Simakov told us on January 14 that DFM Saltanov found his recent discussions in Damascus with Hamas political leader Mesha'al "difficult" because of Hamas' "tough position" that called for an immediate Israeli cease-fire and withdrawal of troops from Gaza, plus the rejection of placing foreign monitors on the border with Egypt. Saltanov attempted to convince Mesha'al to be more flexible and understand that this position was "useless" if it did not provide Israel with the prospect of a halt to Hamas rocket fire and a means to prevent the smuggling of weapons into Gaza.

2. (C) Simakov explained that the GOR could not be "completely sure" about the unity of the Hamas leadership, as it was difficult for them to coordinate between Damascus and Gaza. The Hamas leaders in Gaza were in hiding and afraid to use cell phones for fear of discovery by Israel. Russia used its Embassy in Damascus as a channel of communication with the Hamas leaders in that city, leaving it up to them to communicate with Gaza.

3. (C) Simakov stressed that Saltanov never offered Russia as a mediator between Israel and Hamas, despite press reports to the contrary. The GOR welcomed Egyptian efforts to negotiate a cease fire, which offered the best first step to finding a long-term settlement to the crisis. Simakov said he was not surprised by the Palestinian Ambassador in Moscow's reported January 13 statement that a Middle East conference could be held in Moscow following Israel's upcoming elections, because, once the current fighting ended, it would be time to get the Annapolis process moving again to achieve a comprehensive settlement for Israel and Palestine. Simakov conceded, however, that it would first be necessary to assess the political standing of the Palestinian Authority vis-a-vis Hamas, which would be sure to claim victory so long as it was not destroyed by the Israeli military. Such an outcome would complicate the possibility of Palestinian reconciliation.

4. (C) Simakov avoided our question whether Israel's incursion into Gaza could be seen as a fight against Iranian influence in the region, telling us that one could also argue that the fighting was begun, and continued unabated, by the Olmert government in order to impact the Israeli elections. Simakov added, however, that he thought Hamas was to blame for the current crisis. Simakov called the strong public support for Israel's position, as seen in the media and on blogs, an "echo" of Russia's own experience fighting Islamic extremists in the North Caucasus.

RUBIN